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Alexandra Poulain

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Gazing Back: Decolonial Strategies in Zanele Muholi's "Faces and Phases"

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A shorter version of this article was presented at the World Humanities Forum, Busan, South Korea, on 31 October 2018, and published online as part of the WHF's proceedings.

1 This essay discusses South African photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi's ongoing project "Faces and Phases," which consists in a series of portraits of black lesbians and transmen,[1] mostly (but not exclusively) from South Africa. The project started in 2006 when Muholi first photographed their[2] friend and fellow activist Busi Sigasa at the old Women's Gaol in Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, a central suburb of Johannesburg. Sigasa was a survivor of so-called "curative rape," a widespread practice in South Africa,[3] and had contracted HIV as a consequence of the attack.[4] She was to die eight months later, at the age of 25. The picture (Muholi 2014, 314)[5] is a low-angle close shot of Sigasa, who is dressed in a plain jumper, raincoat and woolly hat and is staring out into the distance, looking calmly determined. She is slightly decentred to the right and has her back turned to a blurred structure which towers above the high grass, and is clearly identifiable as a mirador, a sufficient synecdoche for the Women's Gaol and the history of political oppression and resistance attached to it. The picture makes several points: on the one hand, the blurred fragment of the prison visible in the shot is also in itself a synecdoche of the anti-apartheid struggle. Throughout the apartheid era many activists were incarcerated there in particularly infamous living conditions. While the dominant historiographical narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle has tended to minimize, or even erase, the contributions of black LGBT+ people, implicitly or explicitly condoning the ubiquitous claim that "homosexuality is un-African,"[6] the

shot forcefully inscribes Sigasa within this context, and thus claims the space of political activism as a legitimate sphere of visibility for the LGBT+ community and, importantly, for this particular individual. On the other hand, Sigasa has her back *turned* away from the watch tower in the picture, and is gazing out at something which we cannot see. The shot thus opens up a space of intimacy and freedom for her, about which we can only speculate: she will not be passively written into the grand narrative of the South African nation, but will situate herself within this narrative on her own terms. Poignantly, if we are aware of her story, we cannot avoid the thought that what she is contemplating on the horizon may be her own death – a thought reinforced, in Muholi's 2014 book *Faces and Phases 2006-2014*, by the insertion of Segasa's spoken word poem "Remember me when I'm gone" on the page opposite her picture and the page after that. The poem's title is reminiscent of the dying Dido's aria in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, but the poem forcefully reverses Dido's stance of passive acceptance. Structured on the repetition of the anaphoric pronoun "I," it lists all the positive actions for which Sigasa asks to be remembered, referencing her work as a poet, photographer and activist. It echoes another poem in the book, Sindiwe Magona's "Please, Take Photographs!" which features as one of the epigraphs to the volume, and urges an unknown addressee to "Take photographs of them all / Especially the children; especially the young, / Before it is too late. [...] Before all the children are gone" (Muholi 2014, 8). The poem conjures up a context of pervasive violence and precariousness, where the lives of children are bound to be "snuffed, easily as candlelight" (8), and must be preserved in a photographic archive – an archive which will thus be, in part, a repository of dead presences.

2 Muholi's project in "Faces and Phases" is, in their own words, "to document, document, document"[7] a community which is ostensibly protected by a remarkably liberal body of legislation, yet exposed to the violence of a largely homophobic, transphobic society in which black lesbians, transmen and gender-nonconforming people are the most vulnerable individuals.[8] The archive she is constituting gives a new kind of visibility to a community who is routinely forced, concomitantly, into invisibility (both reluctantly endured and self-inflicted, because visibility is potentially lethal) and hypervisibility in the mainstream media's sensational representations of hate crime victims.[9] Part of the compelling power of this archive lies in the fact that we are aware, as we envisage each new person in a picture, that this person may be dead at the time of viewing. This article seeks to articulate the nature of Muholi's political and aesthetic intervention in this project. Building on and inflecting Judith Butler's 2015 article "Gender Politics and the Right to Appear," it first suggests that it constitutes a visual counter-narrative to mainstream understandings of "the people," in which a community of precarious, invisibilised individuals collectively claim "the right to appear" in the political sphere. Indeed, one might talk of a counterarchive, following Shawn Michelle Smith in *Photography on the Colour Line*. Smith investigates the collection of photographs of modern, urban, middle-class African Americans which W.E.B. Du Bois compiled in his "Georgia Negro" albums presented at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris, challenging the narratives of existing photographic archives produced under the aegis of "scientific" racism, which enshrined white supremacist theories of racial hierarchy. As Baderoon notes, Muholi recognised their work's deep affinity with Du Bois' earlier counterarchive when they encountered it in London's Autograph Gallery in 2010: "I just wanted to cry. What I'm doing is what has already happened. There's a line of black women in photographs taken back to the nineteenth century" (Muholi qtd. in Baderoon

2011, 403–404). With a (necessarily different) focus on their own community, Muholi follows Du Bois's counterarchival strategy, contesting their people's relegation to invisibility or misrepresentation, and claims for them the "right to appear" on their own terms.

3 This essay further argues that the subjects in Muholi's shots do not merely claim visibility but, crucially, return the viewer's gaze. Borrowing Nicholas Mirzoeff's conceptualisation of "visuality" as an arrangement of the sphere of appearance inherent in the project of colonial modernity, it suggests that "Faces and Phases" promotes a counter-visual distribution of space in which participants claim not only "the right to appear" but also, in Mirzoeff's phrase, "the right to look." Reading "Faces and Phases" as a decolonial project, I contend that it uses photography to critique a way of looking which manifests, sanctions and perpetuates the continuing epistemic and aesthetic effects of coloniality in postcolonial South Africa, as well as in other contexts referenced in the pictures.

4 In "Gender Politics and the Right to Appear," Butler attempts to articulate what happens when disenfranchised bodies choose to gather together in a given public space:

> When bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and inserts the body in the midst of the political field and demands more livable economic, social and political conditions no longer afflicted by precarity. (Butler 2015, 24–25)

Such assemblies may well do without verbalization; rather, their action is performative, in the sense that it is the co-presence of bodies in a space where they are not normally visible which speaks for itself and makes "demands." Butler critiques the appropriation by neo-liberal rhetoric of the notion of responsibility, which is perversely resignified as the need "to be only responsible for ourselves, and not for others." Conversely, public assembly performs an ethics of mutual dependence which, she claims, "stand[s] a chance of transforming the field of appearance itself" (43). This is especially relevant for gender-nonconforming people who deviate from the norms which they are expected to embody: "Those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence" (34). By assembling in public places, Butler argues, such precarious bodies claim the "right to appear" – the right to be recognised and accommodated as interdependent bodies.

5 Of course Muholi's "Faces and Phases" is not literally a gathering of bodies, but a collection of photographs; yet, I argue that Butler's concept of public assembly provides useful ways of thinking about its performative intervention in the political sphere. The viewer's experience of encountering Muholi's work varies greatly according to circumstances – whether she comes across the large prints (30 x 20 inc.) in an exhibition, where they can be taken in together at one glance, or faced individually, according to the viewer's standing point, or in the book, where they are much smaller (8 x 5 inc.) and may only be viewed individually or in twos. The life-size shots in public shows give an eerie impression that you are facing real people rather than photographs; individuals, each of them photographed in a way that enhances rather than reduces singularity, but also a community with clearly traceable identity markers (race, and often gender nonconformity). While the viewer is at all times aware that the presence of these individuals is an illusory effect of photographic realism, further undermined by the fact that the prints are in black and white, still they can be seen as

an assembly of disenfranchised virtual bodies in a very specific public space: the privileged, economically and often racially segregated space of the art gallery or the museum. In deciding to take part in the project, Muholi's subjects (to whom Muholi refers as "participants," emphasising their active role) claim visibility for the members of a highly vulnerable community in the politically contested space of high culture, and thus in the incipient narrative of the young South African nation. Risking public identification as lesbians or transmen, and thus heightened exposure to violence, they performatively claim the right to appear in this national narrative, and demand to be included in what constitutes "the people." In South Africa, there is of course a very long history of exclusion of black people from the community of "the people," and of their relegation to a separate category of underdeveloped human beings. In "Idleness in South Africa," the opening essay of *White Writing*, J.M. Coetzee traces this trend in South African ethnographic writing back to what he calls "the discourse of the Cape" – the discourse emanating from observation of the Hottentots of the Cape of Good Hope by the early travellers and settlers from the mid-seventeenth century. Coetzee quotes from one report, published in 1652: "The natives have everything in common from the dumb cattle, barring their human nature" (qtd. in Coetzee 1990, 12). The Hottentots' humanity is grudgingly recognised, but only as the conceptual frontier that separates them from animals with which they are nevertheless perceived to have "everything in common." As Coetzee develops, what motivated these early judgements was the Hottentots' perceived "idleness," in other words their reluctance to enter into a labour-based economy. What the Hottentot is not, in the eyes of the early Boer settlers, is "Man with a developed Physical appearance, Dress, Diet, Medicine, Crafts, etc. – in other words, what we may call Anthropological Man. The Hottentot is Man but not yet Anthropological man; and what keeps him in his backward state is idleness" (22). Ability and willingness to work, unquestionable values according to the Protestant ethos that sustained the early Boer settlers, were seen as the gateways to fully developed humanity, while the "idleness" of the Hottentots kept them in a separate, ambiguous taxonomic zone whence, though human, they could not be recognised as belonging to the community of "the people." Coetzee's take is that the Hottentots' alleged "idleness" may be read as a valid response to, and refusal of, a way of life predicated on waged labour, and that the perceived *attraction* of such a response for white men later "compelled" the authorities to promulgate the racist body of legislation known as apartheid, in an effort to prevent them from defecting from a life of paid labour (35). The anti-apartheid struggle performatively demonstrated the capacity of the disenfranchised majority to organise, assemble and impose their inclusion into the community of "the people," reconfigured in Archbishop Tutu's utopian phrase as the inclusive "rainbow nation," but post-apartheid South Africa has generated its own zones of exclusion. Muholi's work, I suggest, continues the work of demanding inclusion into the category of "the people" for one of the most disenfranchised, vulnerable communities in South Africa, the black LGBT+ people whose sexual preference and/or gender-nonconformity are perceived as irredeemably "un-African."

6 Collen Mfazwe's 2012 shot (Muholi 2014, 27)[10] shows her wearing the sash she won when she was crowned "2nd Prince" of Mr. Uthingo, an LGBT-initiated beauty pageant in Daveyton, Johannesburg. The shot playfully references a famous picture by David Godlblatt: in "Saturday morning at the Hypermarket: Semifinal of the Miss Lovely Legs Competition, Boksburg, 1980," white women are parading in a beauty contest in a

supermarket while lined up black women and children watch sullenly from the audience. Muholi's shot, however, shows us only Mfazwe proudly wearing her "2nd Prince" sash, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion is both quietly encoded and refuted in the picture's semiotic performance. The word "Uthingo" ("rainbow" in Zulu) ingeniously references both the global symbol of LGBT+ identities and the "rainbow nation," a narrative of the postcolonial South African nation as a space of inclusion, acceptance and reconciliation. One understanding of the rainbow symbol is subtly set to play against the other, since the "rainbow nation" has consistently denied inclusion to black LGBT+ people, sustaining the myth that homosexuality is un-African, an importation from white colonial culture.[11] While traditional beauty pageants reinforce heteropatriarchy by celebrating commoditised women whose performance of gender best conforms to idealised gender norms, "Mr. Uthingo" queers the national narrative and opens it up to gender-nonconforming individuals. In this picture Mfazwe defeats categorization within the male-female binary and performs instead a fluid, playful version of gender, with her gracefully nonchalant posture, hands in pockets, untucked shirt, spotted bow-tie, and the conspicuous sash labelling her "2nd Prince," white with black letters, in contrast with the less pronounced shades of grey of the figure and the stone wall against which she is standing. While the "Mr Uthingo" pageant takes place on the margins of mainstream culture, which it parodies, Muholi's pictures are shown in the privileged space of high art – both strategic sites in which black lesbians and transmen performatively claim the right to appear and to be included in the national narrative. The subjects in the pictures thus collectively salvage the notion of "responsibility" from its usage in neo-liberal rhetoric and reclaim a form of communal responsibility, each risking exposure for the sake of inscribing a collective body in the public space of the gallery.

7 However, the singular power of Muholi's portraits does not lie only in the way in which they reinscribe marginalised, vulnerable bodies into public space. The project started with Muholi's picture of Busi Sigasa, but this picture is atypical in that Sigasa is looking away from the camera. With very few exceptions, all the other subjects in the series gaze back at us with enigmatic gazes, and claim not just the right to appear, but crucially, "the right to look." I am borrowing this phrase from Nicholas Mirzoeff's 2011 book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Mirzoeff traces the origin of the word "visuality" to British historian Thomas Carlyle, who used it in 1840[12] "to refer to what he called the tradition of heroic leadership, which visualises history to sustain autocratic authority" (Mirzoeff 2011, 3). Visuality does not only comprise visual perceptions, but "is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space." (3). It produces an epistemic ordering of the world which it seeks to establish as the only legitimate, authoritative one. To do so it first "classifies," then "separates the groups so classified as a means of social organisation," and finally "makes this seem right and hence aesthetic" (3). This is an eerily precise description of apartheid; indeed Mirzoeff sees visuality as one modality of colonial domination, which persists in what decolonial theory has termed "coloniality" – the living legacy of colonialism in postcolonial societies in the form of a worldview which perpetuates hierarchies and forms of discrimination and oppression first produced under colonialism. Visuality is thus a confiscation of what Mirzoeff calls "the right to look," which he glosses as "the right to the real" – the right to construct one's own understanding, or vision, of the real, without submitting to the authority of visuality. "It is the claim to a subjectivity that

has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable" (1). Crucially, the right to look entails the right to be recognized as a subject. "The right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails" (3).

8 My intuition is that what makes Muholi's pictures so powerful is that they dramatize this mutual exchange of looks that constitutes both the person photographed and the viewer as autonomous subjectivities, with no preconceived knowledge of the other, and equally legitimate in the act of "inventing the other." In this sense, they work to disavow the large tradition of ethnographic photographs which posit a one-way gaze, and an asymmetrical production of knowledge according to the pre-established epistemic configuration of visuality. As Tamar Garb observes, in South Africa, the German anthropologist Gustav Fritsch largely contributed to creating this tradition of using photography "to catalogue the 'natives' of South Africa for classificatory and 'scientific' purposes" (Garb 2011, 18), establishing the standards for anthropometric two-part side-view/front-view mug shots. Although anthropometric and ethnographic photography nominally seeks "to capture generic traits and features" and erase individuality, Garb notes that "Fritsch's actual photographs actually seem to exceed the instrumental goals of his project" (18) by unwittingly restoring a sense of their subjects' intractable distinctiveness. In producing a series of black-and-white portraits shot at a similar distance, Muholi references the tradition of ethnographic photography initiated by Fritsch and subverts it by emphatically bringing out the individuality of their participants, and their capacity to gaze back at the camera. In so doing, Muholi is also, crucially, referencing and countering the practice of identity photographs which developed out of the early-day anthropometric mug shots and were used for surveillance and disciplinary purposes throughout the history of colonial South Africa. As Baderoon comments:

> South Africa has a tradition dating from the colonial period under the Dutch of using identity documents to stifle people's movements [...]. Under apartheid, the most intrusive and damaging form of state control was the enforcement of the pass laws, through which black people were forced to carry an identity document, the hated "passbook," or *dompas*. If you were black, the lack of a pass could get you arrested and removed to one of several invented countries, or "homelands." The passbook with its identity photograph was therefore the state's primary instrument of disenfranchisement, racial division, and restriction of movement. (2011, 404)

While the identity photographs in passbooks were used to turn black people into objects of the state's ubiquitous gaze, thus enabling colonial visuality in Mirzoeff's sense, Muholi's "Faces and Phases" parodies the format of identity photographs but restores the subjects' "right to look." In this way, Muholi inscribes themself in a decolonial tradition of photographers which work, in Amanda Du Preez's felicitous phrase, to "topple the controlling gaze of the empire" (2008, 439). Du Preez mentions, among several instances, the photographs which Marc Garanger had to take of forcibly unveiled women when he served as military photographer in the French army during the Algerian war of independence. Garanger was appalled by the violence inflicted on these women and "stood witness to their silent protest" (436) expressed, in his pictures, by their look of defiance. Du Preez glosses: "Almost to say – here we are – you wanted to unveil us to look at our faces – now take a long and hard look at the resistance in our eyes" (436).

9 In a picture from "Faces and Phases," it is not just that the person is looking at the camera, and thus, it seems, at us. Rather, the photographer's framing choices and the subject's gestuality combine to suggest a body engaged in the act of looking, of inviting, sustaining and reciprocating our gaze. While we are at all times aware that this exchange is a fiction, since what we encounter is not a person but a photograph of a person who is not literally present (and may indeed be dead), the power of Muholi's very specific brand of photographic realism is to create the illusion of a reciprocal gaze, so that we feel that as we envisage this person, we enter into an intersubjective transaction with them whereby, as we construct our narrative of who they are from what we are given to see in the picture, we are reciprocally being "invented," and therefore transformed, by them. More precisely, while the co-presence of reciprocal gazes is fictional, we are nevertheless really being transformed by the experience of encountering their gaze which demands an ethical response – whether we experience recognition, solidarity, puzzlement, or rejection. An overview of the project reveals that Muholi has created a repertory of postures which their subjects then inhabit with infinite variations. In one series of medium and close shots the subjects – often, but not always, strong-looking butch women or transmen – face us squarely with arms folded and a confrontational, cocky or merely observant expression.[13] Curiously, almost all of them have their heads slightly tilted to one side, a movement which cannot be ascribed any given meaning yet suggests attentiveness, a degree of concentration in the act of looking, a readiness to engage with us. In another series (which overlaps with the previous one), the subjects have their bodies turned away from us, but their faces towards us, so that the shots literally capture the movement of the body which enables the subject's gaze, returning or perhaps soliciting ours.[14]

10 In the book the pictures are interspersed with poems and testimonies by, or occasionally about, the participants in the project. One recurrent feature is their insistence on being actively involved in the creation of a visual archive of their community. This constitutes what Mirzoeff calls a counter-visuality – an alternative worldview organised by the look of gender-nonconforming people, many of whom describe themselves as "aspiring photographers" and "filmmakers." Sharon "Shaz" Mthunzi tells of her harrowing experience of awakening to her vocation as a traditional healer in an unsupportive family: "When I started seeing things, getting visions, I'd tell them and they would laugh and say I'm young and couldn't possibly see anything, there's no such thing [...]. I was seeing things nobody else saw [...]. I thought I was losing my mind" (Muholi 2014, 224). After initiation, however, she claims to have found a degree of peace, though she registers the difficulty of living up to her responsibility as a healer. Mthunzi's realization of her vocation comes with the discovery of an alternative way of seeing, one which she cannot resist although it is first experienced as a burden and a cause of rejection, before being embraced as life-enhancing. The story is both a poignant individual testimony and an allegory of the experience of discovering oneself different in an unsympathetic environment which makes you question the reality of your perceptions – or your desire.[15] Mthunzi's testimony suggests that non-normative sexualities or ways of performing your gender make you see the world differently, and that part of your responsibility is to claim the legitimacy of that counter-visuality. Mthunzi's story also forcefully inscribes her fluid performance of gender within a specifically African tradition. In the 2014 shot which features opposite her testimony (Muholi 2014, 225),[16] she offers a modernised

performance of the *sangoma*, wearing a traditional hat, dreadlocks, beaded necklaces and bracelets and a leopard-printed skirt, and pointing towards us the end of what seems to be a traditional divination stick. Later in the book, in a 2013 shot (263),[17] she stands against a graphically scratched black plastic sheet, hands in pockets, in a stylish tuxedo, white shirt, dark tie and trendy belt. In both shots her expression is defiant, as if daring us to recognise both performances – the African healer and the sophisticated dyke – as equally authentic, legitimate expressions of who she is. Pamella Dlungwana, also an unforgettable recurrent presence in the project, recalls how for her first shot with Muholi (219)[18] she "insisted on the third eye" (148) – the shiny earring which disrupts the almost perfect symmetry of the face and the picture, and is a modern transposition of the invisible third eye which provides vision beyond perceptual sight in various eastern esoteric traditions. While Dlungwana mentions this with humorous distance, in the picture she both looks at us with a magnetically grave gaze and claims for her sole attribute (as no other piece of clothing or jewellery is visible) a symbol of heightened vision. Finally, Muholi inserts themself into the archive. The last picture in the book is a self-portrait (322),[19] in which they stand in their signature hat and leopard-printed shirt against a leopard-printed cloth, in defiance of the basic rules of "taste," and in a triumphant demonstration of their mastery of the technique of black and white photography. Framing their gaze, the oversized glasses claim the right to look.

11 I want to end this essay with one more picture, that of Nosiphiwo Kulati's portrait (307).[20] For a split second this picture is hard to read, because there is a discrepancy between Kulati's poised look and casual elegance (with her short-brimmed hat, braided hair and dark shirt with a white inscription that reads, intriguingly, "genuine"), her face turning to meet our gaze as we have seen in many other pictures, and what seems to be happening in the background which is strangely blurred, as if deliberately overexposed. How can she be standing there so calmly while people behind her are running in a panic? But if we break away from her gaze and look at the backdrop more attentively, we realise that it is not a scene from real life but an iconic picture which we have all seen before, Sam Nzima's picture of the young Hector Pieterson being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu after being shot by the police during the Soweto uprising in June 1976. The young woman running alongside them, and struggling to keep up, is Pieterson's sister Antoinette, dressed in her schoolgirl uniform, her hand raised in a futile effort to fend off disaster. As with Sigasa's picture with which I started, this shot claims a space for Kulati, and by extension for her community, within the national narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle, and it also asks that this narrative be expanded to include all anti-discriminatory struggles. But because the backdrop of the picture is itself a picture, this picture also demands inclusion within the visual archive of the emerging nation, to which it claims to make a "genuine" contribution. At one level Kulati is using the inscription on her shirt ironically, both to respond to accusations of inauthenticity routinely made against lesbians and transmen (construed as "fake" men), and to reference the nature of both photographs (Muholi's and Nzima's) as simulacra. But beneath the surface of the paradoxical postmodern game, it claims the right for a dissident, counter-visual practice of photographic documentation to be recognised as a genuine modality of postcolonial South African historiography.

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NOTES

1. Men who were assigned female at birth.
2. In keeping with Muholi's preference, I use the gender-neutral pronoun "they" to refer to them in this article.
3. For an extensive inquiry into the "rape culture" of South Africa, see Gqola 2015. See also *Difficult Love*, Zanele Muholi's film documenting her life and work. https://www.imdb.com/videoplayer/vi3128728089.
4. Muholi started the "Faces and Phases" project during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) who supported the notion that the HIV virus caused AIDS, and instituted various

policies aimed to deny antiretroviral drugs to AIDS patients. This resulted in heightened vulnerability and invisibility for the community of South African lesbians and transmen who were exposed to HIV via the practice of "curative rape."

5. http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/faces6.htm.

6. For just two examples of the many responses to this myth, see Lock Swarr 2012 and Osman 2016. Writing about Muholi's representation of transgender people, Gabeba Baderoon comments: "No matter how historians, sociologists and other scholars show convincing evidence to the contrary, the trope that varied genders and same-sex sexualities in Africa are corrupt practices imported from the West is stubbornly invoked by conservative politicians, as well as religious and civic leaders, to strategic effects, as their claims to represent authentic African culture often deflect attention from issues of governance" (2011, 391).

7. Zanele Muholi, during the "Difficult Love" session of the Aspen Ideas Festival, 2013, introduced and curated by Anna Deavere Smith. https://www.aspenideas.org/session/difficult-love at [8:11].

8. As Muholi points out in the course of the 2013 Aspen Ideas Festival discussion (quoted above), the new post-Apartheid Constitution of 1996 opposed discrimination on the basis of sexual discrimination, and in 2006 the Civil union Act legalised same-sex marriage in South Africa. However, Muholi makes the point that despite this liberal legislation, the country lacks anti-hate crime legislation, specific health measures for lesbians and transmen, and shelters for LGBT+ people. They also points out other hardships faced by LGBT+ people in the country (especially by the more vulnerable among these, i.e. black lesbians and transgender people), such as secondary victimisation by police, health services and social care networks, and the rejection of raped women by their families.

9. Writing about South African literature and journalism in 1986, Njabulo Ndebele took exception to the "hegemony of the spectacle" – the systematic choice of an aesthetics of shock and excess to represent the modalities of oppression in South Africa, to the detriment of "complexity," "subtlety" and "interiority" – and also perceived and hailed the signs of a turn towards the "ordinary" in new South African writing. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the penchant for the spectacularisation of violence is still pervasive in South African journalism, but other forms of violence, such as homophobic and transphobic hate crimes, have become the privileged focus of the lurid spectacle of violence. One of Muholi's aims is to reinscribe black LGBT+ bodies within a narrative of the "ordinary." See Ndebele 1986. I am grateful to Claire Omhovère for pointing me in this direction.

10. http://www.artnet.fr/artistes/zanele-muholi/collen-mfazwe-a-hQlwFr0iw-cqvWNhWqd8KA2.

11. A sentiment expressed by the Minister of Culture Lulu Xingwana after walking out of an exhibition at Constitution Hill in 2010 where Muholi's pictures of nude lesbians were shown. She commented that "it was immoral, offensive and going against nation-building." Sally Evans, "Minister Slams 'Porn' Exhibition", *The Times (South Africa)*, 2 March 2010. https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2010-03-01-minister-slams-porn-exhibition/.

12. In his 1840 lecture "On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History", first published in 1841.

13. See for instance the pictures of Bathini Dambza (2013; Muholi 2016, 29); Matseleng Kgoaripe (Vosloorus, Johannesburg, 2011; 50); Anele "Anza" Khaba, (KwaThema, Springs, Johannesburg, 2010; 79); Thembi Nyoka (Partown, Johannesburg, 2007; 102); Bongiwe "Twana" Kunene (Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012; 177); Inno Tebogo Molaudzi (Parktown, Johannesburg, 2014; 182); Tumi Mokgosi (Yeoville, Johannesburg, 2007; 239).

14. See for instance the pictures of Selaelo "Sly" Mannya (Parktown, Johannesburg, 2010; Muholi 2016, 104); Anele "Anza" Khaba, (KwaThema Community Hall, Springs, Johannesburg, 2011; 114); Tash Dowell (Harare, Zimbabwe, 2011; 199); Thandeka Ndamase, KwaThema, Springs, Johannesburg, 2010; 220); Thobeka Mavundla (Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012;

232); Babalwa Nani (Cape Town Station, Cape Town, 2011; 313); Nonkululeko Xana Nyilenda (Los Angeles, 2013; 321).

15. "It's just a phase," the ubiquitous parental response to the coming out of their LGBT+ children, is ironically referenced in the title of the project.

16. http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/faces2014/faces216.html.

17. https://inkanyiso.org/2014/11/17/2014-nov-17-i-love-how-my-two-portraits-contradict-each-other/.

18. http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/faces82.html.

19. https://i.pinimg.com/originals/6b/cd/b1/6bcdb182b6db180ea2f0474c1acd1593.jpg.

20. http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/carnegie/faces194.html.

ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to offer a reading of South African photographer and "visual activist" Zanele Muholi's ongoing project "Faces and Phases," which consists in a series of portraits of black lesbians and transmen, mostly from South Africa. While South Africa's legislation on LGBTI issues is remarkably liberal (for instance, same-sex marriage has been available to LGBTI people since 2006), South African society is still largely homophobic, and the practice of "corrective rape" (or rape used as an alleged means of curing homosexuality) is a widespread threat and an ordeal which numerous black lesbians and transgender people have undergone. Muholi's work aims to give visibility to their community, but in documenting this community they are also claiming their subjects' agency as active participants in the project and, crucially, subjects of the gaze. Indeed, while each picture is differently composed and framed, the common denominator which unites the series is the enigmatic power of the subject's gaze, almost invariably directed at the viewer and challenging us to find our own responses to them in aesthetic, ethical and political terms. Drawing on Judith Butler's 2015 article "Gender politics and the right to appear" and on Nicolas Mirzoeff's notion of "countervisuality," as developed in his 2011 book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, this article reads Muholi's work in "Faces and Phases" as a decolonial project which seeks to challenge the way in which we look and the structure of knowledge.

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Keywords: Muholi (Zanele), photography, counter-visuality, queer, decolonial

AUTHOR

ALEXANDRA POULAIN

Université Sorbonne nouvelle (Paris, France), EA 4398

Alexandra Poulain is Professor of postcolonial literature and theatre at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle. She has published widely on modern and contemporary Irish drama and performance, with a special focus on Yeats and Beckett. Her latest book *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play* (Palgrave, 2016) looks at rewritings of the Passion narrative as a modality of

political resistance in Irish plays from Synge to the present day. She is the current President of the International Yeats Society and the Secretary General of the SAES. Her current research focuses on cultural and artistic representations of shame in postcolonial drama, performance and the visual arts.